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WHEN DID CAESAR WRITE HIS COMMENTARIES ON THE CIVIL WAR?

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As the question stands in this heading, I confess I cannot answer it with complete confidence. But I propose to give in this short paper a reason, and to me a convincing one, for believing that Caesar's account of the campaign of Curio in Africa, which occupies the last twenty-one chapters of Book ii, could not have been written until after his return from his own campaign in that province, viz., until after the beginning of June, 46 B. C. And if my argument has any weight, it will carry with it a presumption that the rest of the work was composed at the same time. It was Caesar's habit to go through with anything he had undertaken; and that he wrote easily and quickly we know from the testimony of his friend Hirtius, in his preface to Book viii of the *Commentaries on the Gallic War*.

When lecturing, as I did for some years, on the history and strategy of the civil wars, I used to tell my pupils that in my view Caesar could not well have written of Curio's campaign until he had himself been on the ground in the spring of 46. So far as we know he had never been in the African province before that year; if he had, it must have been in early life and as a private individual. But there is no trace of any such journey, nor any known reason why he should have taken it. We may in fact assume that he had never been there; and I wish to show that

there is more than one passage in the latter part of Book ii which could not well have been written by anyone who had not been there. I am not aware that this has ever been pointed out, and I have never seen a serious attempt to fix the date of the *writing* of these books. Nipperdey long ago (Praef. 4 of his edition) argued that they could not have been *published* before 46, but that is another matter; and his argument, drawn from Cicero's famous eulogy of the *Commentaries* in his *Brutus* (written in 46), which, as Nipperdey thinks, could not have included those on the Civil War, does not seem to me a very strong one.

The question is of some historical interest in view of the attacks made of recent years in Germany, by O. E. Schmidt and other less weighty critics, on the good faith of Caesar in his narrative of events, especially in Book i. If Caesar did not write these books till 46, three years had elapsed since the events narrated in Book i, and his mind had been fully occupied with other matters since then; so that slips of memory would be natural and unavoidable. That his memory should sometimes deceive him in the way of self-justification was psychologically inevitable; and it does not follow that a man who in 46 had nothing to fear from popular opinion was deliberately trying to put himself right by telling lies which thousands of people then living would know to be such. The German critics, as so often in Roman history, have argued rather as critics than as students of human nature in activity. And the new Italian historian, Ferrero, has gone to such extravagant lengths in his depreciation both of Caesar's motives and actions, that students and teachers of Caesar should be on their guard in reading him.

But to return to my theme. Let me point out in the first place how difficult it is to suppose that Caesar could have found leisure to put his story into literary shape at any time during the three years following on the outbreak of civil war in January, 49. After the Pharsalian campaign he was in Egypt, sore beset until the end of March, 47. True, he did not leave Egypt until the beginning of July (Fischer, *Zeittafeln*, p. 283), but when after eleven years of continuous hard work he fell a victim to the charms of Cleopatra, and with her made an expedition up the

Nile (App. *B. C.* 2. 90), it is difficult to believe—though nothing indeed seems to have been impossible to Caesar—that he should have taken pen in hand for literary work. At the end of that year, after his work in the East and Asia Minor, he was in Rome for about two months, and must have been extremely busy the whole time. But when the African war (December, 47 to June, 46) was over, he left for Sardinia on June 13 (*Bell. Afr.* 98), was detained by storms, and did not reach Rome till July 26. There he stayed till at least November 26, when we hear of him in a letter of Cicero (*Fam.* 6. 14), dated A. D. 5, Kal. intercalares priores, which may remind us that between November and December of that year there were inserted 67 days divided into two intercalary months. He was apparently in Spain before January 1, 45; and we may reckon that he did not stay long in Rome after Cicero met him on November 26. But from June 13 to (say) the middle of the first intercalary month would be a period of about 180 days of comparative leisure. Much indeed was done in that time: but Caesar's time was then more at his own disposal than it had been since he first went to Gaul. If I may hazard a guess, it would be that enforced leisure during the stormy weather which detained him in, or on the coast of, Sardinia was the opportunity which he seized for composition.

Let us now see what was the course of Caesar's travel in Africa, and where it covered the ground of the operations of Curio. He sailed past Clupea, on the eastern side of the peninsula which stands out toward Sicily, and which was evacuated by the Pompeians as soon as Curio appeared on the coast (*B. C.* 2. 23). So far as we know he never was actually there, or at Anquillaria where Curio landed. Of these two places he says very little; he gives the distance between them accurately, and describes Anquillaria in somewhat general terms: "habet non incommodam aestate stationem, et duobus eminentibus promontoriis continetur"—that is all, and it is no doubt what had been told him about a place in which he was not greatly interested. We may compare it with the brief description of the Rhone Valley at Martigny at the beginning of *B. G.* iii, which he seems never to have visited himself after the narrow escape of Servius Galba there narrated. He

writes of the valley as lying between steep mountains, with the river running through it, just as Galba might have described it to him, but without mentioning any other features of the ground, e. g., the sudden turn of the Rhone to the northwest, almost at a right angle, at this point.

Caesar then sailed on to the south of Hadrumetum, and the campaign practically began and ended there; but after the battle of Thapsus he marched direct to Utica, and would come upon the footsteps of Curio at about a day's march from that town. Here he stayed apparently some days (*Bell. Afr.* 89 ff.), then went by the valley of the Bagradas to Zama, and when he had done his work there returned to Utica and embarked for Sardinia. It is here then that we must look for the evidence we want, and here indeed we find it.

He was always deeply interested in the success or failure of his subordinates, and while at Utica he must have been continually thinking of those fatal blunders of Curio which led to the loss of the African province, and to the necessity of a second campaign there. It is clear that what particularly attracted his attention was the position of the so-called *Castra Cornelia*, which Scipio the Elder had occupied in the Second Punic War. He saw its great advantages to an invading and inferior force, and approved of Curio's retreat to this position on the first news of the approach of King Juba. "*Castra erant ad bellum ducendum aptissima natura loci et munitione et maris propinquitate, et aquae et salis copia, cuius magna vis iam ex proximis erat salinis eo congesta. Non materia multitudine arborum, non frumentum, cuius erant plenissimi agri, deficere poterat.*" So Curio rightly decided to remain there and "*ducere bellum;*" and it was only by yielding to false information and to his own impulsiveness and self-confidence, that he abandoned the position and brought himself and his army to destruction (chaps. 36, 37).

This alone might be strong evidence that Caesar had been on the ground and seen with his own eyes the strength of the position, and pondered with keen regret the folly and the ruin of a man whom he seems to have loved (see the words he puts into Curio's mouth in 32. 2). But in a previous chapter he had

already accurately described this position; and this chapter (24) leaves no doubt in my mind that he is describing it from personal observation. On his arrival at Utica Curio went himself with a cavalry force to survey the *Castra Cornelia*,

quod is locus peridoneus castris habebatur. Id autem est iugum directum eminens in mare, utraque ex parte praeruptum atque asperum, sed tamen paulo leniore fastigio ab ea parte quae ad Uticam vergit. Abest directo itinere ab Utica paulo amplius passus mille. Sed hoc itinere est fons, quo mare succedit longius, lateque is locus restagnat: quem si qui vitare voluerit, sex milium circuitu in oppidum pervenit.

Colonel Stoffel (*Guerre civile* I, 309), after examining the ground himself, pronounced this description to be accurate in every point of detail except one;¹ and Caesar must indeed have cross-examined his witnesses importunately if he was writing here on information given by survivors from Curio's army, or others who had been there. And the one point on which Caesar is not accurate is exactly that one point in the whole scene as to which a mistake might easily be made, viz., the distance from the *Castra* to the town of Utica. It is really, says Colonel Stoffel, not one mile, but three. But looking over the flat and marshy plain between the hill on the east and the town on rising ground to the west, the eye might easily be deceived, as it so often is on level ground without any break, or in guessing at distance at sea. It must be added, as Stoffel suggests, that the reading of the passage may be at fault. I see by Mr. Hirzel's critical note on these words, that the sentence "Abest . . . mille" is absent in the MS known as D (*prima manu*), which is perhaps the best of all the MSS of these books.

It is interesting to compare this description, written by a man who was deeply interested in the story he was telling and the ground he was describing, with another by a historian who had not been on the spot. Livy (29. 35), in writing of the use made of it by Scipio, merely says "*Castra hiberna in promontorio, quod tenui iugo continenti adhaerens in aliquantum maris spatium extenditur, communit.*" There is no picture in these words, such

¹I. e., as the coast was then. The sea has now retreated a long way, but the "iugum" remains as it was.

as rises in the mind's eye on reading Caesar's graphic description, which reminds us of the famous account of the rocky slope at Ilerda (Book i. 45), but is even more intelligible to the unassisted reader.

Caesar, like other ancient writers, is not as a rule careful in describing topographical details; they had not what we may call the lecturing or explanatory habit. The account of the Castra Cornelia is an exception to the rule, not so much, I think, because he wished to impress the features of the ground on his readers, as because he himself had observed them with such lively and regretful interest. And I may here remark that I believe it will be found on examination that he is more explicit in describing the scene of a disaster or peril which he had incurred than that of a victory; for example, the nature of the ground at Gergovia is more carefully explained than that of any of his Gallic victories, the rocky slope at Ilerda, than the country to the west of the Segres where the campaign was won, and the operations near Dyrrhachium, where he ventured too much and had to regret it, far more clearly than the the battlefield of Pharsalus, where, if we had no account but his own to help us, we should hardly know within fifty miles where the battle took place.

Then why, it may be asked, has he not given us an accurate description of the scene of the catastrophe in the valley of Bagra-das (chaps. 38-42) which brought the campaign to such a miserable conclusion? He must have passed over it on his way to Zama; but here he has given us no picture. The reason is, I take it, that there was no picture to draw. His account makes it clear that the ground was all open and level, suited for the operation of cavalry, which could proceed even by night without difficulty, as we see in chaps. 38. 4 and 39. 6. There was no salient feature in the landscape, or none at least which had any bearing on the result.¹ Low hills or rising ground (*colles*) are mentioned in 42, to which the panic-stricken troops finally tried to make their way;

¹ A friend who has traveled in the valley of the Mejerda confirms the impression I had gained from Caesar as to the nature of the ground. Though the river has changed its course near the sea, it is quite clear that it flowed then as it flows now, a few miles inland, through a flat alluvial plain, without salient features. Stoffel writes (p. 109) of some "*collines*" which approach the river about ten kilometers from the Castra Cornelia, which are no doubt the "*loca superiora*" of chap. 40 *ad fin.*, and the "*colles*" of 42. 1. Apart from these there seems to be nothing but the the level plain.

but these seem to have been some distance away, for the enemy's cavalry was easily able to prevent this attempt at escape.

One other point may be mentioned before I leave these reflections, set down at the suggestion of Professor F. W. Kelsey, to the judgment of critics. Varus, the Pompeian commander at Utica, had pitched his camp in a strong position under the walls of the town. This position Caesar describes with unusual care, perhaps to make it plain that it was impossible to make any serious attack on either camp or city, and that the wise course for Curio to take, seeing that he had no siege-train, was "ducere bellum" by occupying the Castra Cornelia. He writes as follows (chap. 25, *init.*): "Hoc explorato loco Curio castra Vari conspicit muro oppidoque coniuncta ad portam quae appellatur bellica, admodum munita natura loci, una ex parte ipso oppido Utica, altera a theatro, quod est ante oppidum, *substructionibus eius operis maximis*, aditu ad castra difficili et angusto." I think that any reader would naturally conclude that these lines were written by one who knew Utica well, and not from second-hand information. Such a conclusion is in my view made certain by the mention of the "substructiones" on which, as it seems, the structure of the theatre had to be erected, no doubt on account of the sandy nature of the soil. These solid foundations formed a strong flanking defense for the camp, and made the access to it extremely difficult. I can well imagine an informant mentioning the theatre to Caesar; but I find it hard to believe that the "substructiones" would have found their way into his story if he had not seen them with his own eyes.

It might be argued that in this same book (chaps. 9, 10), Caesar has very minutely described the construction of a tower and a "musculus" used during the siege of Massilia, which he could not have seen himself, as they had been destroyed by the Massiliots by fire before he returned from Spain (chap. 14). If he could at second hand describe such a complicated piece of engineering as the tower (the "musculus" may be left out of account as being neither new nor complicated in the method of its construction), why should he not be able to describe also at second hand, the position of the ground before Utica?

To this I would reply: (1) That plans and directions for an ingenious bit of engineering, an invention for protecting the builders of a tower within range of an ingenious enemy's powerful missiles, were undoubtedly preserved for future use, and were accessible to Caesar at any time; (2) That this tower was solidly constructed of brick, not of wood like the rest of the siege machinery, and that therefore the shell of it at least would probably have remained standing until Caesar's arrival, when the construction could be explained to him on the spot by his engineers; (3) That a piece of machinery is a very different thing from a strategical position. The former can be explained with the help of plans; the engineer's own description may be incorporated in one's work, as was perhaps the case both here and in the account of the Rhine bridge. But the description of the *Castra Cornelia* and the position before *Utica* is the work of a general, accustomed for many years to examine the lie of the ground in military operations: it is the pivot on which Caesar's criticism of Curio's movements turns; and I cannot believe that he would have ventured to criticise them as he did, even if he had enjoyed the modern advantage of photography to help him, without having been himself on the spot.

If then (1) Caesar had never been at *Utica* before the spring of 46, and (2) if we have convincing indications in these chapters that he had been on the spot when he wrote them, we get a *terminus ex quo* for the composition of the second half of Book ii of the *Civil War*, and a strong presumption that the whole work was written after the campaign of *Thapsus*. As I have already said, the most natural and convenient time for their composition would be immediately after he left *Africa* (June 13), or any time between that date and the end of the following November.

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